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LEARNING TO LEAD

A political appointee discovers an ambassador's job is demanding yet stimulating

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MY GIRLHOOD ASPIRATIONS never included being an ambassador. But in December 1977, when Vice President Mondale called to ask me to consider it, I was intrigued and said I would. I felt, however, it was highly unlikely that I would get the appointment. I'd been in politics long enough to know that such plums usually go to big campaign contributors. President Carter had gotten only $2000 from us.

So, when Mondale called again about three weeks later and greeted me with "Congratulations, Madame Ambassador," I thought he was teasing. I was ironing in the basement, and no ambassador worth her salt would be caught doing that. I suddenly wanted to reconsider. If Mondale noticed my unenthusiastic response, he didn't comment. He told me what I was to do next, I thanked him and promptly, half in panic, called my husband. He believed in the appointment from the beginning. "It fits with a lot of things you've been doing up to now," he said, "And besides, haven't you been telling me women have to take advantage of new opportunities, that they can't hang back?"

Despite my husband's advice, I was agonizingly ambivalent. For weeks I would wake up in a cold sweat wondering how my family would manage without me. Not one of my three grown children would be accompanying me nor could my husband. I had traveled throughout the United States a great deal on assignments for *The Minneapolis Tribune*, as National Democratic Party officer during Hubert Humphrey's presidential campaigns, and as a volunteer in a number of national organizations. But there was something about that intervening ocean that gave me a feeling of total inaccessibility—really breaking ties. I worried, too, about being female in a job historically held by males.

I was equally concerned about my non-career status. How would I be received by the people with whom I had to work—Dutch, Americans, and all those other diplomats whose governments didn't believe in political appointees. And like many women who take a step up the career ladder, I was haunted by the idea of failure and uncertain about my ability to do the job. After gritting my teeth for months, my strong belief that women have to take risks and pursue success in their careers, instead of anticipating failure, finally prevailed.

After weeks of laboring over forms and a month of briefings but no language training, I left for the Netherlands. Because the United States requires its employees to "fly America," I had to go the long route—Minneapolis to Detroit, Detroit to London, London to Amsterdam—arriving at my destination at 7:15 a.m. A group of Dutch reporters welcomed me with the usual range of questions, which my own journalism background helped me through. The Dutch chief of protocol, a rotund little man with very formal manners, was also there to greet me. Finally several members of the embassy staff, observing my drooping eyelids, whisked me off to the residence in the Hague.

I suddenly became aware of the dimensions of my new job when I walked into the huge, 10-bedroom house. The public rooms were badly in need of redecorating—just the kind of chore I detest. There was a household staff consisting of a Yugoslav, a Ghanaian, an Egyptian, and a Filipino. I realized I would have to be my own wife, managing a household at the same time as I was learning my ambassadorial duties.

There was no doubt in my mind which had to come first. I had been warned by two former ambassadors that it was essential to establish my credentials in short order. My first day in the office we held an afternoon reception at which I introduced myself to the staff of 125 Americans and 114 Dutch. I said I would be visiting each of them individually, that my door would always be open, and that I wanted to work with them to make our embassy the most effective in the Hague. It was a teamwork speech and I really meant it. In those early days, I would need them more than they needed me.

It took about a month before I felt that I was a team member in good standing. During that period, I discovered that many of my past activities had given me knowledge and skills I could depend on in this new assignment. My years as a journalist, a political activist, a volunteer, and a director of business boards had taught me more than I realized. I knew how to ask questions, listen, and rely on intuition. I also knew a lot about self-discipline and organizing my work. And I knew how to work with people, all kinds of people. I had always been a compulsive reader—especially about politics and international affairs—and it pleased me that my staff considered me a quick study.

I was very lucky to have a good collection of people making up that staff. I was permitted to choose the individuals for two jobs, deputy chief of mission and my personal secretary. For the DCM's job, I interviewed 10 men, most of whom came highly recommended. It was not an easy decision; I knew my

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relationship with the person I chose would be critical not only to the ambiance of the embassy but to my performance as well. I finally chose a man who, in addition to his experience and personal qualities, had a lovely sense of humor. My personal secretary was chosen from a group of four women, and the choice, largely intuitive, turned out to be one of the best decisions I've ever made. She knew how to unravel red tape, and to her the State Department bureaucracy was as familiar a structure as my home was to me.

AS AN AMBASSADOR, I was responsible for a number of constituencies. Each one added to the pressure, chaos, and fatigue of the job, but also to its interest. For starters, every ambassador has an all-important constituency of one—the occupant of the White House—to whom he or she is directly responsible. Then there was the State Department, with almost daily inquiries for information or urgent demands that the host government be told this or asked that or persuaded to do something they usually preferred not to do. There was the staff of the embassy and two consulates, with all the personnel problems and management requirements you would find in any office of about 250 people, plus a few more that go with the foreign territory. Complicating the staff picture was the fact that the State Department contingent was a tiny minority, outnumbered by the representatives of other government agencies: CIA, Commerce, Drug Enforcement, Agriculture, Defense, and so on.

Then there were the many Americans living abroad, some 15,000 of them in the Netherlands. There were business executives who had a problem or just wanted the ambassador to know they were there. There were numerous social clubs looking for a speaker, and American schools and sports clubs. I talked to parent-teacher associations, threw out first baseballs, and went to scores of monthly meetings. And there were my diplomatic colleagues—about 70 ambassadors in the Hague. When you arrive, protocol demands that you pay a courtesy call on each. Doing your job requires that you routinely keep in touch with those who represent countries particularly close to the United States or in which we have a special interest. Add to all of the above: Dutch business people with investments in the United States, the cultural community, Dutch educators, and of course, visiting congressmen and other U.S. government officials. And one of the most important constituencies of all is Dutch government officials and political party leaders.

Within the embassy, the ambassador is everybody's boss and is to be consulted and informed on all key matters; the ambassador's decision should prevail. For example, the CIA section of the embassy made two requests. First, they wanted to increase the number of their agents. Second, they asked to "hide" several of their people in other divisions. This is not an uncommon practice nor is it a particularly secret one. Both requests were approved in Washington but, as ambassador, I had the final word and it was "no." The CIA staff was already fairly large for its mission and for the size of the country. Further, I could not see the value—and I *could* see the harm—in attempting to "hide" agents from a government as open and friendly as that of the Netherlands.

In several other matters, large and small, I followed my own instincts against staff advice. I insisted upon two hours twice a week for Dutch lessons, and I visited programs and projects in fields where I had longtime concerns. My staff was quite unsettled when I visited places such as a new women's prison in Amsterdam, a facility for the elderly mentally ill, or a program for juvenile delinquents. But they came to see that we all benefited from these visits because we learned much about Dutch attitudes and the horrendous cost of their welfare state. In turn, the Dutch interpreted my visits and language lessons as reflecting a genuine interest in their country and welcomed me in a most heartwarming way.

My job, of course, was more than making visits, throwing out baseballs, or making the rounds of social functions. There were two situations that made it particularly difficult. During my years in the Hague, NATO's decision to deploy nuclear weapons in five Western European countries, including the Netherlands, created deep controversy. The coalition government, clinging to a slim and unpredictable margin of support, kept hoping the opposition would just go away, even as the peace movement grew stronger. It was impossible to persuade government officials to discuss the subject openly and present their position in a constructive way. While the prime minister assured me of the government's support, he and other officials kept silent and wanted us to do the same.

It was my job to inform them that they were asking the impossible and that we intended to hold forums and interviews and generally speak out on the subject. We found a number of Dutch leaders outside of government who joined us. The issue was profoundly emotional, making it difficult to discuss with opponents, but we tried with members of parliament and various representatives of the peace movement. It was a hard test for my patience as well as for the remnants of my high school debating skills. If we didn't change many minds, at least we earned their respect.

We also did not create a rift between the Dutch and U.S. governments because there was no name-calling, no finger-pointing, and no accusations. We openly recognized the Dutch political dilemma and expressed our appreciation for the influence they already had exercised in NATO councils. They had been key participants in the decision to hold arms control negotiations simultaneously with preparations to deploy. If the negotiations were successful, the deployment would stop.

The controversy brought to the fore more anti-Americanism than I realized existed in the country. For the most part, it was a generational problem; those under 45, who had little or no memory of World War II or its aftermath, considered the United States and the Soviet Union nearly equal menaces,

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powerful giants trying to gain dominance at great risk to the "peace-loving" world. What bothered me—and I did not hesitate to express my objection—was that the criticism directed at these two giants was decidedly lopsided against the United States. In fact, we were frequently attacked for our human rights behavior.

For example, at the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—a human rights violation of gigantic proportions—a story appeared in a Dutch newspaper about our immigration policy toward homosexuals. While we were strongly urging the Dutch government to condemn the Soviet action, 132 of the 150 members of parliament debated our policy and signed a petition condemning it. Some 500 demonstrators paraded in front of our embassy one afternoon. We received scores of bomb threats. Our Amsterdam consulate was picketed and had windows broken and paint thrown on the building. Several weeks later, when the Dutch government finally responded to the Soviet invasion, the demonstration before the Soviet residence was a pale, unemotional affair compared with the spectacular one we had merited.

Several party leaders asked to meet with me at the time, but I was so angry I put the appointment off for a few weeks. When they finally came to the office, they were appropriately uncomfortable. It's rare that I lose my temper, but even after two weeks' wait, I felt they deserved a tongue lashing. I reminded them the law is rarely enforced and there are ways for homosexuals to ensure they will not be turned back from entry ports. I also mentioned that the United States has large and active organizations working for gay rights and that homosexuals hold public office and are an influential pressure group. "How could you possibly give us priority criticism over the Soviet Union?" I demanded. They didn't have an answer and, several days later, they told my political attache that I was right to have been so angry. Sometimes losing your temper at the right time can be useful, but it ought not to become habit-forming.

THERE WAS ONE other situation that certainly put me to the test. It is one that increasingly confronts Foreign Service officers, a number of whom have been killed or wounded by terrorists. One doesn't usually associate terrorism with the Netherlands. I had been briefed, of course, and both the residence and the embassy had locks, alarms, barriers, and an occasional big police van parked at the curb. But for most of my time at the Hague, I was casual about security. I walked the two miles to the embassy when time and weather permitted. On free Sunday mornings, I rode my bicycle through the dunes or along the marvelous bike paths. Sometimes I drove my car to the tennis courts, about a 20-minute ride from the residence.

Everything changed about two months before I was scheduled to return home. Dutch security officers informed us that a group opposed to U.S. actions in El Salvador had voted to kidnap the U.S. ambassador. The officers were very concerned. Dutch security agents are permissive in the extreme toward protest behavior so, if they said there was a problem, there was a problem. From that moment on, I was always accompanied by three guards carrying machine guns. My every departure and arrival at the embassy was recorded. I was urged to be unpredictable, to follow no set schedule. You never know what a creature of habit you are until you must change your ways, driving to the office by varying routes, leaving for work at different times.

My first reaction was fear. The thought of being kidnapped interfered with my sleep and my digestive system. After a few days, a kind of icy calm took over. It was dehumanizing and intimidating to be regarded as a symbol and not as a person. I fought off those feelings by doing my job with determination. Not an appointment was canceled nor function unattended. I felt strongly that, political appointee though I was, my behavior must not disgrace my Foreign Service colleagues or myself. I do not look back on that time with pleasure, however, and for months after I came home, I was suspicious of any car that pulled up alongside mine.

At its core, leadership is lonely and stressful. Even though I strongly believed in consultation and consensus and practiced them both, in the end many decisions were mine alone, and the issues were rarely easy. But there is compensation for that loneliness. If you find it exciting to test yourself against a challenge, if you enjoy power but are sensitive to using it responsibly, then leadership, particularly on behalf of your country's interests, can bring great satisfaction.

When I arrived in the Netherlands, a journalist welcomed me with a particularly nasty column about my inexperience in diplomacy and my non-career status. The column irritated me because I was more journalist than ambassador, and I felt she had been journalistically unfair. She knew nothing about me, had made no effort to find anything out, and had chosen to write from ignorance and bias. When I left, she wrote another column. I occasionally glance at its complimentary phrases to remind myself that leadership is worth the effort. □

This article was adapted from a graduation speech presented by Geri Joseph on June 11 at the University of Minnesota for its midcareer program on leadership.